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## HISTORY TOPICS

### Merritt Brothers

#### Overview

Following a gold rush that had turned into an iron rush on the Vermillion Range, Leonidas and Alfred Merritt began hunting in the 1880s for iron ore in the area known to Native Americans as the "Mesaba." While some ore had surfaced on the eastern end of the Mesaba, it was not rich enough to be worth processing. The Merritts became the first to meet with success when they found rich, marketable ore on the west end of what would become the Mesabi Range. Soon after that, the rest of the Merritt family got involved, including five brothers and some nephews. In 1890, the brothers drilled their first successful mine, which would eventually become Mountain Iron. The brothers could not transport the ore, however, since no railroads yet ran out to the Mesabi Range. Under their watch, the Duluth, Missabe, and Northern Railway was built in 1891. Before long the Merritts' creditors demanded repayment of their loans, but they simply did not have the cash. They turned to industrialist John D. Rockefeller, who agreed to help in return for a significant interest in the Merritts' company, and the brothers were virtually forced to accept. Unfortunately for the Merritts, their stock did not hold its value and, in 1894 the Merritts had to sell off their remaining shares to Rockefeller. The Merritts tried to sue Rockefeller for fraud, but, in the end, the whole family only got \$1,000,000, enough just to pay off their creditors. After discovering iron ore on the Mesabi Range and spending five years mining and developing it, the Merritts had built a fortune and lost it all.



## Get Started With Secondary Sources

- **"He Knew Millions Were There Before He Saw a Bit of Ore,"** by Neil M. Clark.  
"The story of a great pioneer who was laughed at and ridiculed, but who went right ahead and stuck to his own idea until he had unearthed the Missabe Range, one of the richest iron mines in the world."  
In The American Magazine, vol. 96, no. 3 (Sept. 1923): pp. 26-27, 173-175.  
*MHS call number:* FOLIO F605.1.M5 C5.
- **"History of Oneota, Minnesota,"** by Manley P. Burns.  
*MHS call number:* P1169-15; see the green "P" Manuscripts Notebooks for more details (there is one 11-page item).
- **John E. Merritt, Explorer,** by Edna Merritt.  
[S.l.: s.n.], 196-?.  
*MHS call number:* F605.1.M498 M4.
- **"The Merritt Brothers and the Opening of the Mesaba Iron Range,"** by Paul Baughman Ingersoll.  
M.A. thesis (University of Chicago), 1928.  
*MHS call number:* Microfilm 126 (1 reel of microfilm).  
*MHS call number:* F614.R23 I5 - for a print copy.
- **"The Merritt Family."**  
Photocopy of a typescript; original in the St. Louis County Historical Society Archives.  
*MHS call number:* CS71.M572 1930.
- **"The Merritt's Great Mesabi Adventure,"** by Grant J. Merritt.  
Paper read at the 69th Annual Meeting of the St. Louis County Historical Society, Jan. 22, 1991.  
*MHS call number:* TN403.M6 M37 1991.
- **Seven Iron Men, by Paul De Kruif.**  
The story of the iron-hunting family of Merritts, pioneers of northern Minnesota.  
New York: Harcourt, Brace, [1929].  
*MHS call number:* TN403.M6 D4.

## Primary Resources

- **Alfred Merritt v. John D. Rockefeller, 1895-1900**  
This is the transcript of the legal proceedings between Merritt and Rockefeller. It begins with Merritt's suing of Rockefeller and continues through Rockefeller's appeal and the final settlement. A printed copy beginning with the appeal is also available.  
*MHS call number:* Microfilm 853 (1 reel of microfilm).  
*MHS call number:* HD9517.M6 U54 - for a print copy.
- **Leonidas Merritt's Answer to the Gates Pamphlet**  
Leonidas Merritt responded to Gates's pamphlet (below) by explaining his own side of the story in a pamphlet of his own. In it, Merritt calls the Gates pamphlet "a palpable web of falsehood, misconstrued statements, vile innuendo, and reckless conclusions," and he tries to disprove each of the charges made by Gates.  
*MHS call number:* HD9515.M6 M473 1912.

- **"Reminiscences of Early Days of the Head of the Lakes"**

A 21-page typescript of Alfred Merritt's memoirs covering the time from 1856 to 1894, roughly from when his family moved to Oneota until just before his lawsuit against Rockefeller.

*MHS call number:* F605.1 .M496 A3 1915.

- **"The Story of the Mesabi"**

This is the memoir (written in 1934) of the youngest Merritt brother, Andrus, and it covers the family's early years in New York and Duluth, the Merritts' discovery of the Mesabi Iron Range, and the eventual loss of their fortune to Rockefeller.

*MHS call number:* P2122; see the green "P" Manuscripts Notebooks for more details (there is one box of material).

- **The Truth About Mr. Rockefeller and the Merritts**

Many Minnesotans were disenchanted with Rockefeller after the legal proceedings between him and the Merritts. In order to clear up bad publicity, Rev. Frederick T. Gates wrote this pamphlet defending himself and Rockefeller.

*MHS call number:* HD9515 .G3.

- **Willard R. Cray Papers**

John M. Shaw, Cray's legal partner, served as counsel for Rockefeller in the suit Alfred Merritt filed. Two documents from Merritt's side are in Cray's papers.

*MHS call number:* P2566; see the green "P" Manuscripts Notebooks for more details (there are three boxes of material, but only two documents concern the Merritts).

## Newspapers

- Biwabik Mesaba Range
- Duluth Daily News
- Duluth Evening Herald
- Duluth Herald
- Duluth News Tribune
- Minneapolis Journal
- Minneapolis Tribune
- St. Paul Dispatch
- St. Paul Pioneer Press
- Virginia Enterprise
- Virginia Virginian

## Visual Resources



- **Visual Resources Database** subjects that may be useful for this topic:
  - **Alfred Merritt**
  - **Leonidas Merritt**
  - **Lewis Merritt**
  - **Mountain Iron**
  - **Mesabi Range**

## Learn More

- Check the **library catalog** for other materials.

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